

**Statement of Ms. Terrie S. Rouse,
Chief Executive Officer for Visitor Services
for the Capitol Visitor Center**

Before the Committee on House Administration

**Regarding
The Capitol Visitor Center: the Visitor Experience**

October 17, 2007

Mr. Chairman, Congressman Ehlers, members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here today to talk about the Capitol Visitor Center (CVC) and the wonderful visitor experience that awaits all those who come to their United States Capitol next fall.

First, I'd like to say what an honor and privilege it is for me to be working here. I want to thank the Acting Architect of the Capitol Stephen Ayers, CVC Transition Director David Ferguson, the entire staff of the Architect of the Capitol (AOC), the House and Senate Oversight Committees, and the bipartisan, bicameral Congressional Leadership for their support and assistance over the past few weeks. I have been very impressed with the major efforts that were already underway by the AOC and the CVC Project Team when I arrived. I also want to acknowledge the gentlemen who are at the table with me today. Mr. Tom Stevens, Director of the Capitol Guide Service, has more than 20 years experience on Capitol Hill, and a first-class operation. I have enjoyed working with him as we prepare to train our staff for the new visitor experience in the CVC. I also want to thank Chief Phil Morse and Assistant Chief Dan Nichols for working with us to ensure that our visitors are safe and secure during their visit.

And, I thank this Committee, Leadership, and Congress for giving me the opportunity to be a part of history — opening the doors to the largest expansion of the U.S. Capitol Building that is devoted to the citizens of the United States. I believe that the Capitol Visitor Center is the symbolic door to the nation – a portal – that will become an inviting place to remind visitors of

their roles as citizens. As an extension of the Capitol, it will provide a fitting welcome and introduction to the People's House so all may witness the workings of our legislative process.

To provide the Committee with a bit of background about myself: I am originally from Youngstown, Ohio. I received my Bachelor of Arts degree in Intercultural Studies from Trinity College, a Masters of Professional Studies from Cornell University, and a Master of Arts degree in African History from Columbia University. Over the years, I have been an educator, serving as an adjunct professor or instructor at a number of universities across the country, including New York University, Columbia University, and Cornell University.

I have also spent a number of years in the museum world, most recently as Executive Vice President and Director of Museums for Kansas City's (Missouri) Union Station, a 900,000-square-foot historic landmark. I have also provided consultant services to a number of cultural, non-profit organizations across the United States including a joint project between the City of Philadelphia, the National Park Service, and Independence National Historic Park (The President's House: Freedom and Slavery in Making a New Nation), and worked with the City of Charleston on the development of the International African American Museum.

Prior to my work in Kansas City, I served as Executive Director of the Atlanta Ballet; was President and CEO of the African American Museum in Philadelphia; and worked as Executive Director at the Children's Museum of Maine. Before assuming my current position one month ago, my favorite job was as Director of the New York Transit Museum, where we created an interpretative world where eight million people could better understand and appreciate a complicated transportation system that impacts their daily lives.

As I mentioned, I have been on the job now for a month, and I am very impressed with the planning and the work that was done before I arrived here. During construction, the framework for the operations plan was also being put into place by the AOC, Leadership, and the Oversight Committees. They have provided great leadership on these efforts to date. Since my arrival in Washington, I have been working closely with the

Operations Transition Team. One of my top priorities is to recruit and hire a staff to help prepare the CVC to receive visitors. Other operational issues we will be working with Congressional Leadership on include the advance reservation system, developing a CVC Web site, developing a transportation plan, and reaching out with a public information campaign. There is much to be done, but it is clear that everyone has the same wonderful vision: Enhance the visitors' experience to the U.S. Capitol.

Throughout my career, I have learned one thing: during each person's visit to a museum, art gallery, or exhibit, there is at least one "awe moment" – an experience or sight that literally takes one's breath away and inspires.

My goal is that every person who comes into the CVC will feel welcomed; will look up at the Capitol Dome through the sky lights; will see the model of the Statue of Freedom in the Great Hall and experience at least one "awe moment." Once they experience that moment, we hope they will become engaged, appreciate what we do in the Capitol, understand why the House and the Senate operate in the way they do, and celebrate their roles in our representational government.

Mr. Chairman, the United States Capitol is a unique building. Not only is it a working office building, it is a living museum and place for citizens to gather to celebrate national events, express themselves, or mourn presidents. Over the years, visitors to the Capitol had to stand outside in the cold, rain, or extreme heat and humidity while waiting to tour the building. Congress recognized the need in 1998 for the construction of a visitor center to "provide greater security for all persons working in or visiting the United States Capitol and a more convenient place in which to learn of the work of Congress."

In keeping with Congress' intent to provide a place to learn about Congress, along with the increased focus on safety and security, the mission of the Capitol Visitor Center is to provide a seamless visitor experience. This experience is enhanced by the ease and comfort by which visitors can move about the CVC, view the exhibits, and benefit from the level of service and many amenities provided to them for the first time, such as a restaurant, many restrooms, and

orientation theaters. Most importantly, the exhibits and programs about the workings and history of Congress and architecture of the Capitol are designed to inspire generations of Americans, “We the People,” about the legislative process and our representational government.

While there will be a focus on the history of Congress, it is important to remember that the CVC is a new structure – a 21st Century facility – therefore, we are using state-of-the-art technology and modern conveniences to vastly improve the level of our visitor services. As I mentioned earlier, we provide a number of amenities to guests to the Capitol for the first time. In addition, a number of other improvements are planned.

First and foremost will be the implementation of a comprehensive tour program. Our professional, highly-trained guides will be able to tailor our tours to their audiences whether it is a large group of Philadelphia 8th graders on a class trip, seniors from Grand Rapids, Michigan, stopping in Washington as part of a fall foliage tour, or architects coming to marvel at the complexity of building such a stately underground facility. Following the inaugural year of the CVC, additional specialized tours may be developed to further interpret the role of Congress and integrate the other treasures of Capitol Hill such as the Library of Congress, the U.S. Botanic Garden, and the Capitol Grounds.

While this is a decision that will be made by Congressional leadership, not by me nor the AOC, we believe we will serve Members of Congress better by integrating, not eliminating, the staff-facilitated functions into the tour program. We look forward to continued discussions on this issue with Congressional Leadership to come to a final determination on this and many other operational issues over the next several months. During their visit, we intend to help our visitors “walk a mile in Members’ shoes.” This will begin as soon as they enter the CVC, view the orientation film, visit the virtual House and Senate Chambers, and then enter the Capitol where they will see their Representatives and Senators in action.

An invaluable tool in this process will be assisted listening devices; headsets that connect the visitors to the tour guides. The advantages of this technology are many. Visitors can move about more freely while still hearing their guide clearly without the distraction of other groups.

This will also greatly reduce the noise level in the Capitol as guides will speak in a normal volume and not have to compete with ambient noises and other guides. Most importantly, in the event of an emergency, the guides are able to manage groups, communicate important information, and quickly and effectively lead them to safety, if necessary.

Of course, the visitor experience begins long before a guest sets foot in the CVC. In that regard, we intend to set the tone of an individual's Capitol tour when they visit the CVC Web site, book their tour tickets through an advanced reservation system, or ask a staff member for directions to the restaurant or to their Member's office.

Mr. Chairman, in the Exhibition Hall, carved into the white marble are the words, Out of Many, One. Our founding fathers selected these words to describe the coming together of the 13 colonies into one, united country. Today, we come together, united, in our goal to make a visitor to our nation's Capitol an incredible, patriot, educational, and inspiring experience. I look forward to continuing to work with this Committee, our Oversight Committees, the Congressional Leadership, Acting Architect Stephen Ayers, and AOC staff to make a visit to the Capitol Visitor Center and the United States Capitol the experience of a lifetime.

This concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.